

DEAN FOREST VOICE

To Diane Harris
Forward Planning
Forest of Dean District Council

All members of the Forest of Dean District Council, AONB Steering Committee,

Dear All,

Further to our presentation to your group on 29.10.07 we would ask you to consider the following :-

Dean Forest Voice (DFV) was born out of a meeting that was called at the Miners Welfare Hall in Cinderford on the 9th March 2001. The purpose of the meeting was primarily to put the Countryside Agency Officer, Val Kirby, in touch with grass root Forest people. At the end of the meeting a desire was expressed to form an organisation. This was done and from that day forward DFV worked closely with Val Kirby and the emerging Integrated Rural development Project. (IRD)

Our constitution states that the main objective of DFV is: To promote and maintain the Forester identity and enhance the pride and culture of the people of the Forest of Dean by creating a powerful voice capable of being heard and taken account of, particularly at all levels of government and every other administrative organisations in the Forest of Dean. To date DFV has over 1000 members and is still growing. That is our background.

The issue of a special status for the Forest of Dean came to a head in the late 1990s. In the run up to the general election in 1997, the Shadow Secretary of State for the Environment (Frank Dobson) visited the area and gave a commitment to offer the Forest of Dean " a new custom built special status appropriate to its unique history and character." The new Labour Government subsequently asked the Countryside Commission (soon to become the

Countryside Agency (CA), and now Natural England) to look again at the area and make recommendations on how the broad aims behind special status might be best achieved. In 1998 the Countryside Commission commissioned a technical review of the relevant issues and the potential management structures that could deliver the appropriate level of protection. In April 1999 the review concluded that AONB status provided the most suitable basis for the area's designation, but that this status "should be interpreted in a new and imaginative way to enhance social, cultural and economic as well as environmental objectives". The CA Board decided in late 1999 to defer the decision on special status in favour of trialling an Integrated Rural Development approach in the area, run through the Agency's South West Region team. This was at a time when the Agency was developing its ideas on IRD. From the onset DFV were opposed to AONB perceiving it as imposing external and unwanted restrictions in an area whose unique qualities, and problems, require locally-driven solutions. DFV were closely involved in, and worked with the IRD project manager (Val Kirby) by participating in the baseline studies, as well as keeping the project managers in touch with grass root opinion.

The programme's progress was monitored frequently by the CA Board Members, and the minutes of Board Meeting (AP03/06)

recorded that - *The primary purpose of AONB designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty (p7, CA 24).*

The district as a whole would not meet the criteria. Focusing on natural beauty misses the point: what makes the FoD so special is the intimate association between cultural heritage, tradition, landscape and communities.

The things that make the FoD special occur across the district. In such a diverse and complex place the inclusive IRD approach, underpinned by the Landscape Character Assessment and other baseline studies, may be more appropriate than an AONB designation. Moreover, the process of designating an AONB could widen existing divisions.

The report goes on to list the lessons learnt, among them being:-

The Forest of Dean is special because of the complex interrelationships between landscape, sense of place, natural and cultural heritage and tradition.

An AONB designation is not necessarily an appropriate way of addressing the

issues facing the FoD.

In a complex, diverse area such as this, it takes time to establish experimental programmes;

Key projects have demonstrated ways of using landscape, environment and heritage to underpin regeneration and the building of social capital.

The partners involved in the IRD programme included :-

English Heritage
English Nature
The Environment Agency
DEFRA (MAFF)
Forest of Dean District Council
Forest Enterprise
Glos. Association of Parish and Town Councils
Glos County Council
Glos. Rural Community Council
Government Office for the SW
South West RDA
The Countryside Agency

Phase one of the FoD IRD programme concluded that the projects undertaken produced both information and ideas to aid the social and economic regeneration of the FoD.

The information included the compilation of baseline studies that included the 'Dean by Definition' work and the 'Landscape Character Assessment'

These studies provided a foundation for a second phase of work, which built on the specific culture, heritage and character of the FoD.

The studies undertaken were:-

The Landscape Character Study
The Dean by Definition Project
The Draft Tourism Study
The Biodiversity Study
Archaeological Survey and Historic Landscape Assessments

The essence of the innovative, local development approach being that the distinctiveness or special qualities of the area should be clearly articulated and should form the basis of measures for protection and regeneration.

1. By identifying and articulating what is special through an analysis of the 'baseline studies', to establish a firm basis for future decision making in the FoD.
2. By building on what's special to foster the sustainable development of the

Forest of Dean's economy and communities.

3. By exerting appropriate influence on the areas planning authorities, to foster the better conservation and enhancement

of what is special about the FoD's landscape and environment.

4. By exerting appropriate influence on the area's planning authorities, to foster the better conservation and

enhancement of what is special about the FoD's culture, economy, heritage and biodiversity.

5. To derive lessons of possible wider applicability in rural England, including advice on the value of this

approach/methodology for managing, protecting and enhancing special landscapes and, more generally, the management of 'local special -ness'.

Dean Forest Voice are of the opinion that the data and information collected - when incorporated into

planning policy and given teeth, would give the necessary protection and 'special status' required for the FoD .

The information and data would be used to influence those organisations that prepare and implement plans, strategies

and prospectuses of various sorts, namely:-

- * The Planning Authorities (i.e at District and County levels)

- * SWRDA

- * Other Economic Development Players

- * Parish and Town Councils

- * Transport Planners and Providers incl. the Highways Dept.

- * Tourism Organisations

- * Land Managers

- * Other regional and national bodies, such as DEFRA, English Partnerships, Natural England,

- and the Environment Agency.

The evaluation of what became Phase 1 of the Programme recommended that the programme be continued

but with changes of emphasis, and in April 2003 the CA Board committed funding to the Second Phase,

which became known as 'Buildin On What's Special' (BOWS). This phase was initially funded to run until

March 2005. Delays in replacing staff resulted in a decision by the CA Board in 2004 to extend the Programme

until March 2006.

Responsibility for funding and leading the Programme switched from the CA to the South West Regional

Development Agency (SWARDA) in 2005.

The IRD process and the Baseline Studies are now shelved; and with SWARDA.

In November 2006 The Forest of Dean Intrgrated Rural Development Pilot

Programme (Final Evaluation Report) was published (prepared for SAWRDA by Land Use Consultants) . No conclusive decision on the future status of the Forest of Dean is reached. Among the reports key findings it states (6.77)

"It is significant that the RDA's strategic interest in the Programme focussed on its purpose as a local delivery mechanism (and in this respect the RDA was significantly more involved in other regeneration programmes that the CA had been).

The RDA had little strategic interest in the Programme's other purpose as a pilot of national thinking on IRD.

This led it to be less interested in the more innovative aspects of the Programme, although it should be said that

by the time the RDA took over responsibility for the Programme it was entering the final completion stages.

It is regrettable that once the paperwork and funds were transferred to the RDA, the CA, which could have maintained

the focus on the 'test-bedding' purpose of the Programme, had no involvement in the management of the Programme."

(6.62) concludes....." There remains the real need for a 'champion' to be found who will take forward the

philosophy of IRD and the outputs of the baseline studies.....Unless one of the key agencies or bodies with a

cross-sectional interest in the District's economic and social development and environmental protection takes

this role, many of the achievements of the IRD Programme risk being lost.

DFV are aware of the fresh impetus to gain AONB Status for the Forest of Dean, and although there is a strong lobby

for this status there are also many opposed to it.

DFV believes that the Statutory Forest itself needs protection - if only to protect it from becoming a giant 'Theme Park'.

Outside of the Stat. Forest we need homes for local people and quality jobs for local people.

In our consideration the Forest of Dean District Council, as the elected legislature of the Fof D, and Forest Enterprise are

the best people to carry this forward and to become the 'champion' mentioned in the Final Report.

When consideration is given to any forthcoming request for a change in status, we ask that you consider the work

already completed in the shape of the Baseline Studies, and the £1.1 million pounds spent on the project to date.

GET IT OFF THE SHELF - DUST IT DOWN - COMPLETE THE WORK.

DFV are still of the opinion that this is the best way forward for the Forest of Dean and it's People.

Keith Morgan
(on behalf of Dean Forest Voice)

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